

MAKING THE CASE:



SUPPORTING
COMMUNITY ORGANIZING
IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The story of our nation's capital is a tale of two cities. Washington, DC is a symbolic beacon of democracy and opportunity for people around the world, but the residents of the District of Columbia are beset with severe social problems that are shockingly at odds with our capital's symbolic image. DC has one of the worst performing school districts in the country; the highest per capita rate of adult illiteracy; one of the highest rates of income inequality, child poverty and HIV infection in the country; and a soaring unemployment rate. These and other social problems are segregated along race and class lines, with low income African Americans faring much worse than their more affluent White neighbors. In addition, District residents have only a limited form of democratic self-governance because the US Constitution denies them both voting representation in Congress as well as the legislative and fiscal autonomy that is a core right of every state in the country. Fortunately, there are several key factors in the District that can bring about the necessary changes to improve the quality of life for District residents and help DC live up to its image.

First and foremost among these factors is the ascendancy of community organizing as an effective strategy for social change in the District. Over the past several years, there has been a marked growth in the number of community organizing groups working with low and moderate income residents to

effect lasting change in their communities. Through strategic organizing campaigns, these groups have secured important changes for DC residents including winning a living wage for city workers and paid sick days for all workers; increasing access to affordable housing, homeownership, and green jobs training opportunities; and building and repairing schools, recreational facilities and libraries. Even though the work is relatively new and severely under-resourced, community organizing groups have secured hundreds of millions of dollars in benefits for low and moderate income residents and produced a five year return on investment for local DC foundations of \$122 for every grant dollar spent. Finally, the District's distinctive political structure and its proximity to national political media and decision-makers present unique opportunities for local organizing campaigns and victories to take on national significance.

All told, there is a strong case for supporting community organizing in our nation's capital. There is both a great need and great opportunity to improve the quality of life for low and moderate income communities in DC. This opportunity can be best realized by increasing the level of support for community organizing in the city. Local and national funders can partner with the growing body of foundations in the District to learn more about organizing in the city. Together, we can help DC become a true beacon of hope, equity and justice for the nation and the world. ■

INTRODUCTION

When the Hill-Snowdon Foundation (HSF) decided to open its home office in Washington, DC 6 years ago, we did so because we wanted to contribute to the growth and development of one of America's most unique cities. As a national social and justice funder with an emphasis on community organizing, we recognized the city's distinctive place within the political, social and cultural history of the United States. Across the world, Washington, DC is viewed as a shining symbol of freedom and democracy and the seat of power for the most powerful nation in the world. Within the US, Washington, DC is the central location for democracy in action as both the home to our elected national officials and policymakers and the gathering place for everyday citizens to seek redress and change in the nation's policies.

As we learned more about our new home, we were surprised to find that DC was actually two contrasting cities – Washington, DC and the District of Columbia. Washington, DC is a global symbol of democracy; however, the residents of the District of Columbia can practice only a limited form of democratic self governance and have no voting representation in Congress. Washington, DC is a symbol of hope, opportunity and prosperity around the world and a symbol of our national pride, but District residents face some of the worst economic, educational, health and social outcomes of any other city in the nation. Washington, DC hosts a vibrant, well resourced national advocacy infrastructure and is historically the site for mass popular demonstrations to change federal policy. But, the District of Columbia has an under-resourced, modest, albeit growing infrastructure for community organizing to engage marginalized communities in local policy decision-making.

Discovering this tale of two cities led HSF to develop a new program area, the Fund for DC, to strengthen the practice and culture of community organizing in the District. The Fund seeks to mitigate some of the most pressing issues impacting low and moderate income residents in the District through community organizing. Another aspect of the Fund is to encourage other funders to support community organizing as a strategy for change and equity in the District. As we engaged other funders, we received positive responses, but also encountered some apprehension as we talked with colleagues nationally and in the region. National social justice funders

tended not to prioritize DC as a target for their grantmaking, in part because some did not know the severity of the social justice issues faced by DC residents. Other national funders had attempted to support community organizing in DC in the past, but had difficulty finding local groups to support. Many local funders were not familiar with community organizing as a social change strategy, and tended to focus on service and advocacy to address the District's pressing needs. Other local funders were skeptical of the effectiveness of community organizing, but were not aware of the many recent successes of local community organizing efforts.

Recently, there has been a marked growth in both the capacity and impact of community organizing in the District, but this is not a well known story. In many cases, community organizing groups have partnered with advocacy and policy groups to wage successful citywide policy change campaigns to improve the quality of life for DC's most vulnerable populations. These policy wins have helped increase access to affordable housing, quality childcare, and better schools in low income communities; as well as protecting the rights of low wage workers, renters and immigrants. The growth in community organizing in the District combines with some unique characteristics of the local political landscape, creating a ripe environment where community organizing can flourish. Finally, DC's distinct role as the nation's capital can mean that model legislation advanced by local organizing groups and coalitions has the potential to gain national significance - such as recent DC legislation around paid sick and safe days legislation and marriage equality.

The purpose of this paper is to begin to tell the story of community organizing in DC in order to make the case to local and national funders to support community organizing in the District. This paper is the first installment in a series about strengthening community organizing in Washington, DC. The series synthesizes findings from research commissioned by HSF on the barriers and opportunities for organizing in the District with our own observations from supporting community organizing in the District over the last 6 years. Subsequent installments offer a deeper examination of the community organizing landscape in DC and recommendations for how to maximize its growth and impact. The hope is that these papers will provoke dialogue and interest in supporting community organizing efforts that enhance the quality of life and equity in DC. ■

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING?

Before we begin to talk about community organizing in DC, it may be useful to talk about community organizing more generally. Although we have the country's first "community organizer in chief" in residence at the White House and the Obama candidacy lifted the term community organizing to a new level of visibility, the actual concept and strategy of community organizing is still somewhat misunderstood. Community organizing is a multi-faceted strategy for social change that relies on the leadership of members from the affected community to bring about change. The goals of community organizing are to

- improve social conditions, outcomes and the quality of life for marginalized communities through systemic change;
- build the leadership within marginalized communities; and
- strengthen democratic participation and accountability of decision makers to marginalized communities.

Community organizing emphasizes that those affected by an issue take the lead in representing themselves with decision-makers, media and the public, and relies on the leadership of these constituents to develop the direction and strategy of the campaign.¹ More often than not, community organizing works with communities on the economic, social or political margins who are often overlooked or ignored by those in power (e.g., communities of color, low income communities, immigrants, youth, low wage workers, etc.). Community organizers help community members identify and analyze issues that have an impact on their community, identify solutions for the issues, develop strategic campaigns and various tactics² to get decision makers to enact their solutions and monitor and evaluate the implementation of solutions.

In DC, funders and non-profit groups sometimes use the terms community organizing and advocacy interchangeably, when in practice they are two distinct social change strategies. Although both community organizing and advocacy involve policy change at the systems and institutional level, the process for achieving

that change and the range of benefits enjoyed by the affected group(s) are very different. Advocacy campaigns typically involve a professional advocate that represents an individual, group or issue in their efforts to achieve a specific policy change. While the affected person or persons may be called to testify or provide their experiences to support the campaign, they tend not to have decision making authority for the direction or strategy of the campaign. Also, advocacy organizations tend not to invest many resources in the long term leadership development of the affected person(s), but rather focus on securing a change in policy as its core goal.

By contrast, community organizing emphasizes that those affected by an issue take the lead and are the experts. In DC, HSF often uses the term "resident-led decision making" as a synonym for community organizing³ to help distinguish it from advocacy by emphasizing the essential role that residents or constituents have in leading the work. The community organizer's role is to facilitate the leadership of community members and refrains from being out front in public. In addition to seeking broader change, cultivating individual level change or personal transformation through leadership development is also a key outcome of organizing. Throughout the organizing process, residents become aware of their power and develop the capacity (e.g., knowledge, skills, and expertise) to be leaders and recognize their potential as individuals and their ability to improve their lives.⁴ Given the emphasis on individual and collective empowerment, building leadership capacity is as important to community organizing as achieving long-term policy and institutional change. Indeed, the ultimate goal of community organizing can be viewed as building the capacity or power of a community to effect change on any issue or policy that they deem important. In brief, the prioritization of leadership development, democratic decision making and building the long term power and capacity of communities distinguishes community organizing from advocacy as a social change strategy. Nevertheless, organizing and advocacy are inter-related strategies for social change and can complement each other powerfully in a grantmaking portfolio. ■

...I was helped with refining my public speaking skills and given assignments to improve my writing skills. I learned how to draft a strategic power analysis and conduct effective congressional lobby visits. Most importantly, I realized that I was not alone in my personal struggles...I love the "do-it-yourself" mentality that I've developed through my involvement with ROC. This attitude and approach has not only led me to be an active member of ROC, but it has also helped me take charge of and maintain my personal life. I've started making more use of my time, am eating better and exercising regularly, and am reading and writing almost every day.

Nikki Lewis, Restaurant Opportunities Center-DC

ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST

FOR

Community Organizing leverages impact and scope.

- Community organizing seeks to change policies and practices that can affect whole communities and segments of the population. The impact of the change almost always affects many more people than those directly involved in the organizing work. Consequently, funding community organizing expands the reach of grant dollars and multiplies the impact and benefits for communities that funders care about. Particularly in these times of diminished assets in foundations, community organizing represents a powerful strategy to leverage the impact and scope of limited grant dollars.

Community Organizing addresses the root cause of social problems.

- “You can’t service yourself out of poverty,” remarked one local funder in recognition of the limitations of funding strategies that only address the manifestation of social inequity, but do not try to change the underlying determinants of that inequity. Community organizing seeks to remedy and eliminate social inequity by targeting the cause, not just the symptoms. It seeks changes on a systems and/or institutional level where policies that can foster social inequity can be embedded. By doing this, it creates a broad range of opportunities for community residents to thrive and a more sustainable and lasting impact.

Community Organizing re-invigorates democracy.

- As we argue earlier, the core strategy, if not the core purpose, of community organizing is to engage people, particularly people on the political margins, in the full practice of democracy. Community organizing helps community members fulfill their civic responsibility to hold their elected officials accountable, shape policy that impact their lives, and enhance their quality of life. Community organizing helps ordinary people to engage in the daily

practice of democracy toward perfecting our union. It bears out the self-evident truth that all wo/men are created equal by helping the voiceless raise their own voices and speak truth to power. The strategy creates community spaces where all people are respected regardless of race, class, gender, creed, nationality, age, etc.

Community Organizing works.

- Whether you look at historic examples of community organizing, like the Civil Rights Movement, or you look to the long list of policy victories achieved by DC organizing groups in the last six years, it is hard to deny that community organizing is successful at creating meaningful, lasting and broad scale change. Even when specific policy demands are not won, community organizing is still successful if it increases the level of engagement and builds the leadership capacity of previously disengaged residents. As with anything, community organizing groups exist on a continuum of effectiveness and each group has to be assessed on its own merits. However when conducted well, community organizing is a powerful strategy for effecting personal, community, systemic and social transformation.⁵



COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

AGAINST

Too Political — Community organizing seeks to engage those on the political margins in the process of holding elected officials and others with power accountable. Thus, it is “political” by definition. This is neither bad nor controversial. Rather, it is an essential part of our democratic process. Foundations and non-profit groups do have the legal ability to engage in lobbying and electoral work, although there are limitations. Each foundation has to make its own determination regarding what it is comfortable with, and groups have to be cognizant of operating within the limitations of a non-profit structure. However, a vibrant democracy requires that people exercise their right to engage within the political arena.

Confrontational — Community organizers employ a broad range of tactics to achieve their goals including research, policy analysis, strategic communications and media, letter writing, offering testimony, e-advocacy, rallies, demonstrations, etc. While organizing may be best known for its rallies and direct actions, in practice these tactics are most often used as a last resort when all other methods have failed. Organizers utilize these methods because those in power often grow accustomed to ignoring or deflecting the demands of those who are perceived to have less power. Thus, a strategic show of people power coupled with media exposure is an important tool to have at an organizer’s disposal. Sometimes, it is the difference between success and failure.

Slow Moving — Any meaningful change takes time – whether on the individual, policy, institutional or societal level. Progress toward substantive change rarely follows a straight path and occurs in fits and starts. The complexity, scope and powerful interests involved in organizing for social change make this even more apparent. Depending on the circumstances, it may take anywhere from 2-5 years to achieve the ultimate goals of many organizing campaigns. However, the return on investment if success is achieved can far outweigh grant dollars invested in an organizing effort. Nevertheless, funding community organizing and social change work requires patience and a firm grasp of the overall goal. The most effective organizing groups divide their work into a series of short-term benchmarks or “small wins” so that they

can keep their constituents motivated, track their progress and make necessary adjustments and explain their progress to funders.

Hard to Evaluate — Evaluating an organizing campaign or organizing groups is not necessarily the daunting task that it is sometimes assumed to be. The challenge often comes from a lack of familiarity with the organizing process, and the consequent difficulty of identifying critical areas for evaluation. Additionally, there is sometimes the challenge of attribution or how much a group can claim that their efforts were (solely) responsible for a specific change. As a guide, we offer the following evaluative criteria that Hill-Snowdon uses for assessing the work of community organizing groups:

- *Base Building & Leadership Development* – is there a systematic process for recruiting new members and cultivating existing members, and can they mobilize enough people power to be effective?
- *Role of Constituents and Staff* – how are members/leaders involved in decision making and campaign development and how effectively can they represent the issues, strategy and work of the group?
- *Issue, Process and Analytical Sophistication* – how knowledgeable is the group about their issue(s), the actual process for securing their desired change and their analysis of the context?
- *Tactical and Strategic Acumen* – how relevant and effective are the group’s strategies and how flexible and creative are they with their tactics?
- *Strategic Partnerships* – does the group have the necessary partners to be successful and is it building relationships with key groups and entities?
- *Success Securing Substantive Improvements* – what changes has the group actually won and what impact did these changes have on the community?
- *Organizational Development* – how sound is the group’s administrative, fiscal management and fundraising capacity?

MAKING THE CASE

There are a variety of reasons to support community organizing in DC, but for the purposes of this paper we will explore the following three reasons:

1 Critical Need for Social Change in the District – low income residents in the District face greater economic and social inequities than residents in most other major cities in the country. National social justice funders should support organizing in DC because the relative need is so great, while local funders should support organizing as a social change strategy to resolve the local inequities that their foundations seek to address.

2 Distinctive Opportunities for Change – several factors in DC offer distinct opportunities for local and national change such as an ascendant community organizing infrastructure, a unique political environment for progressive

change, and the potential for local work to facilitate national efforts. National and local funders should take advantage of the opportunities and maximize the potential to achieve meaningful change in the District and beyond.

3 Community Organizing Works – even though community organizing is under-resourced in the District, community organizing groups and their allies have secured significant victories in recent years that have improved conditions for scores of low and moderate income residents. National and local funders interested in effecting significant and sustainable change for marginalized communities in DC should support community organizing.

The remainder of the paper delves deeper into each of these reasons for supporting community organizing in DC. ■

CRITICAL NEED FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE DISTRICT

Low income residents of the District of Columbia fair worse than other low income residents in the country on almost every major economic and social indicator. All residents of the District are equally disadvantaged by the city's "special status" under the Constitution which limits its self-governance. In any city, these problems would be alarming; but it is profoundly disheartening and shocking for these severe disparities to occur in the nation's capital. This section highlights many of these social disparities.

Poverty & Income Inequality

One out of every three residents in Washington, DC is low income. In 2008, one out of every 10 residents lived in extreme poverty or below 50 percent of the poverty line (\$10,600 for a four person family with two children). An estimated 11,000 more residents fell into poverty in 2009, the largest one year jump in nearly two decades.⁶ DC's child poverty rate (32%) is almost

double the national average and about two thirds of DC's public and charter school students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Income inequality in DC is greater than in nearly every large US city and is largely split along racial and geographic lines. In 2008, the poverty rate among African American households was 24 percent, more than three times as high as for White, non-Hispanic households (7 percent), and greater than the 18 percent poverty rate among Latino households. While White DC residents enjoyed a 20% increase in their incomes since 2000, incomes for African American and Latino residents have remained stagnant.

Affordable Housing

Since 2000, it has become increasingly difficult for many and nearly impossible for some low-income families in the District to meet their basic need for housing. DC lost a third of its affordable rental units between 2000 and 2007.⁷ With a smaller supply, the median rent for an apartment in DC rose 23 percent when adjusted for inflation, an

increase which ranks fifth among the nation's big cities. Lastly, 16,000 people faced homelessness in DC in 2008. In the same year, the need for emergency shelter far exceeded its availability as there were less than 2,300 emergency shelter beds and housing units for single adults when over 9,300 people were homeless or received homeless services on a daily basis. Similarly, there were 170 emergency shelter units for families when the need was estimated at over 2,800.⁸

Education

DC ranks last or near to last in key areas of student performance when compared to major urban school districts and states.⁹ More than half of all public elementary and secondary students are not proficient in math or reading at their respective grade levels.¹⁰ Access to quality schools is segregated along race, income and geographic lines, such that the predominantly African American and lower income sections of the city have significantly fewer quality public school options than the majority White and more affluent sections of the city.¹¹ Furthermore, 60% of 9th graders leave DC public high schools before finishing and only 9% of incoming 9th graders complete their postsecondary degree program within 5 years of entering college (the national average is 23%).¹² These long-standing problems persist despite a relatively small enrollment when compared to the size of school systems in other major cities (45,000 public and 28,000 charter) and one of the highest rates of per pupil spending among public schools throughout the country (\$14,594).¹³

Unemployment

Unemployment in the nation's capital is higher than the national average (12% vs. 9.5%) and more than three times higher in predominantly African American parts of the city. African Americans represent 55% of the total population, 44% of the DC workforce, but 71% of the unemployed. Many of the jobs in the city are high skilled jobs, but an estimated 50,000 District residents lack the skills to compete for meaningful

employment.¹⁴ At the crux of this crisis is DC's staggering adult illiteracy rate of 37% - which is higher than any state and comparable to major cities - with 61% of these adults reading below the 8th grade level.¹⁵

Health & Healthcare

Washington, DC has the highest HIV/AIDS rates of any state or city in the United States with 128 cases per 100,000¹⁶ as compared to the national rate of 14 per 100,000. HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death among adult DC residents ages 25-44. In terms of general life expectancy, there is an 8 and 3 year life span disparity between District residents and their neighbors in Northern Virginia (72 vs. 80 years) and Southern Maryland (72 and 75 years), respectively.¹⁷ These disparities persist despite a 90% health insurance coverage rate for all adults in the District.¹⁸ District leaders have made significant investments in providing health insurance coverage for its most vulnerable residents. Still, more than half of DC residents live in areas that have limited access to primary care facilities. Similarly, access to fresh, nutritious foods is a major concern, especially for low-income neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River that have been described as "food deserts." The District's neighborhoods with the highest concentration of poverty, Wards 7 and 8 have fewer full-service grocery stores than Ward 3, which has the District's highest concentration of wealth.¹⁹

DC's "Special Status"

Many people living outside of the District of Columbia may not be aware that DC residents do not have voting representation in Congress. This disenfranchisement persists despite a long history of advocacy and organizing among Washingtonians around self-rule, statehood and Congressional voting rights.²⁰ DC's official license plate, which reads "Taxation Without Representation", captures the perverse irony of DC residents being denied full democratic rights because they live in the capital of the most powerful democratic nation in the world. DC's uniquely undemocratic status

...low-income [DC] residents often feel left out, left behind, and even perhaps more important, disadvantaged by the progress itself, by the rising rents, by the rising prices. Development has not been good for everybody, and it has not generated yet enough employment, enough training opportunities, for the current low-income, less-skilled resident.

**Alice Rivlin, Reducing Poverty in the District of Columbia:
A Community Discussion, Brookings Institute, March 2007**

is enshrined in the Constitution of the United States under the “District Clause” which created the District of Columbia as the nation’s capital – officially designated a District and not a state- and placed its governance under the auspices of Congress so that no state could have the advantage of being the nation’s capital. DC residents did not win the right to elect a mayor and city council and exercise a limited version of self-governance until Congress passed the Home Rule Act of 1973. Still, the democratically elected officials of the District must submit all legislation and annual budgets²¹ to Congress to be approved by lawmakers who have no direct accountability to District residents.²² Not even in the four U.S. territories—where residents do not pay federal taxes as District residents do—are local laws and budgets subject to congressional approval.

The special status of the District of Columbia has a major effect on its ability to raise revenue and provide quality services for its residents.²³ While the District is not a state it performs the duties of a state and city government (e.g., police, fire, motor vehicle services, Medicaid, etc.). Although it performs the functions of a state, it does not have the full taxing authority of states. Congress prohibits the District from levying a tax on income earned in the city from non-District residents – a basic power enjoyed by all states. Given that non-residents earn two-thirds of all income in DC, the absence of this income represents a huge loss of potential and much needed tax revenue. Moreover, the District cannot

levy property taxes on federal property (e.g., the White House, Capitol Building, federal office buildings, military installations, monuments, museums, etc.) or embassies, all of which occupy vast amounts of prime real estate. Finally, the federal government often does not compensate the District government fully or at all for national events, such as inaugurations and mass demonstrations. In 2003, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated the District’s structural tax deficit, meaning the gap between the District’s actual resources and what it would need to deliver an average level of public services with average tax rates. In making a clear case that the prohibition against taxing non-resident income was a major factor, the GAO placed the District’s structural deficit between \$470 million and \$1.1 billion dollars.²⁴

...the democratically elected officials of the District must submit all legislation and annual budgets to Congress to be approved by lawmakers who have no direct accountability to District residents.

The District’s lack of democratic accountability and rights on the federal level make it all the more important to build a strong local community organizing infrastructure to ensure that DC residents have ample and meaningful opportunities for civic engagement and grassroots democratic participation. ■

■ DISTINCTIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

As a complement to the challenges discussed above, DC’s community organizing sector has many strengths that can be capitalized on to address many of the city’s most pressing issues.

Ascendant Community Organizing Capacity

Recognizing the needs facing DC residents, a few national organizing funders (e.g., Edward M. Hazen Foundation, Jewish Fund for Justice, etc.) attempted to support community organizing in DC in the early 2000’s. Most of these funders pulled out because they had difficulty identifying local organizing groups and local funder partners. However, in the last six years, the capacity for local DC residents to win policy change through community

organizing has grown substantially. In particular, the number of new community organizing groups, intermediaries and coalitions has grown; a host of significant policy wins has been secured; and a consistent core of local funders that support community organizing has emerged.

The number of community organizing organizations and projects in DC has almost doubled since 2002. By Hill Snowden’s count, there are nine local organizations and/or projects whose primary focus is community organizing. Additionally, there are at least another 2 emerging community organizing organizations or projects in the city (see page 16 for a complete list). Additionally, some advocacy and service organizations in the city are integrating

organizing as a complementary strategy in their work to ensure that they best meet their clients' needs. This is an increasingly important and promising aspect of the landscape for community organizing in DC.

Although the number of groups has grown, many of the organizations have small budgets and staff. For instance, the median budget for the nine established organizing groups or projects in the city is \$219,000 with a median staff complement of 2.5 FTE. (The next installment in the series provides an in-depth analysis of local capacity). To magnify their strength, DC organizing groups often develop coalition-based organizing campaigns with other organizing, advocacy, service and civic groups to win citywide policy change. This collaborative approach was used in a host of recent policy victories such as securing a living wage for city employees and contractors; requiring developers to set aside a portion of their units as “affordable”; and becoming only the second jurisdiction to pass paid sick days legislation and the first jurisdiction to pass paid “safe” days legislation for the victims of domestic violence (see page 14 for a list of key victories).

The growth in the number of groups and the reach of the policy wins would not have been possible without the support of a small but growing base of local funders in the region. Local funders have made new investments in community organizing, formed funding collaboratives to strengthen organizing in the District, attracted national funders to support organizing work in the city, and formed the Greater Washington Social Justice Forum - a local learning community on organizing and social justice issues in the region. The mission of the Forum is to ensure more fair and just outcomes for low-income and other marginalized communities in the region by helping to build a well-resourced, vibrant, and effective social justice infrastructure. The presence

of a solid core of organizing groups and local funders is a more recent addition to the community organizing landscape in DC and provides new opportunities for partnership among local and national funders.

Distinctive Political Environment

DC's ascendant community organizing infrastructure intersects with its distinctive political environment to create unique prospects for securing change through community organizing.

Specifically, DC's legislative process, relatively progressive electorate and young civic infrastructure provide key opportunities for organized residents to make change.

In recent years, many organizing and advocacy groups around the country have had to shift their efforts from influencing local city councils and mayors to state legislators and governors because the progressive measures passed in local jurisdictions were increasingly being turned over by more conservative decision-makers at the state level. The need to organize both at the city

and state level puts enormous strain on these groups, and makes securing change even harder. Organizers in DC don't have this problem because the District of Columbia has the peculiar distinction of being a city that functions as a state. Unlike the 50 states, the District does not have a state legislature or assembly to serve as another layer of governmental authority.²⁵ Thus, the city council in effect serves the functions of a unicameral state legislature and the mayor in effect serves also as the governor. Although securing policy change is never easy, it is often less complicated in the District than in other “states.”

In addition to this structural advantage, DC's electorate, and by extension, its elected officials are relatively progressive – meaning that they are more supportive of social safety net programs and the regulation of the private sector to ensure



community benefits. For instance, the DC City Council has passed model legislation granting paid sick and safe days to all workers, legalized marriage between same sex couples, instituted inclusionary zoning measures to better balance the development of market rate and affordable housing, provided broad access to health insurance and subsidized childcare for low income residents.

These progressive policies do not come easy and organizers and advocates fight hard for every win. But there are perhaps more opportunities to advance progressive legislation in DC as compared to other jurisdictions. One such opportunity is the City Council's relative newness to direct action organizing. DC's civic infrastructure is only 37 years old and consequently there is not a long history of residents organizing to demand change from elected officials. In this environment, a smaller number of organized residents can mobilize and hold the same or greater influence to win policy changes as a much larger number of residents in cities with longer histories of community organizing.

Improving the Prospects for National Impact

Supporting community organizing in DC can help extend the reach of local efforts to national policymakers and elevate local campaigns to the national stage. This opportunity is somewhat aspirational because there is not a well developed infrastructure to consistently support this work yet. However, there are examples that point to the potential significance of this opportunity. For instance, community organizing groups in the District have partnered with organizing groups in other cities and mobilized their local members for rallies and actions in DC. This type of support helps groups project a stronger and larger united front and also reduces travel costs. Similarly, leaders of local DC organizing groups that are affiliates of national organizing networks have represented these networks in meetings with congressional lawmakers and Administration officials. Overall though, this support has been mostly informal and sporadic. To fully capitalize on the opportunity to extend the reach of groups outside of DC onto Capitol Hill, local DC organizing groups would have to receive support to take on this extra work.

National advocacy and organizing campaigns (e.g., healthcare reform, minimum wage, immigration, etc.) often try to secure policy changes on the city or state level first as a way of building momentum for federal policy change. However, these national

campaigns tend to overlook the District as a strategic site to win local policy victories—even though the District's distinctive political environment offers unique opportunities to move progressive policy on the “state” level. Case in point, the District was not a strategic site for the national campaign to secure paid sick days for all workers. Nevertheless, local DC advocates and organizers recognized the need for paid sick days from their constituents and launched a local paid sick days campaign. Local organizers and advocates did receive some technical assistance from the national campaign before they began their work, but DC still did not become a strategic priority for the campaign. Ultimately, DC became only the second jurisdiction in the country to pass paid sick days legislation (and the first to pass paid safe days legislation granting paid time off for domestic violence related issues) and has helped propel the national movement for paid sick days.

The paid sick days precedent, and the many other opportunities for advancing progressive policies, position DC as a strategic location for facilitating and highlighting national organizing efforts. In order to maximize this potential DC organizing groups need to increase their capacity for strategic communications and building partnerships with national advocacy/organizing groups. Linking community-based groups in the District with strategic communications resources could help them develop more poignant messages, access the national media and ultimately, raise the visibility and reach of their work and similar campaigns. Additionally, strengthening partnerships between national campaigns and local organizing groups could help to identify common ground, solidify relationships and capitalize on emerging opportunities to create change. ■



COMMUNITY ORGANIZING WORKS

As mentioned earlier, some funders have expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of community organizing in DC. Some of this is based on a lack of familiarity with local organizing efforts or with organizing as a social change strategy in general (see “Arguments for and Against Community Organizing” on pages 6-7). However, DC based community organizing groups have been very effective at securing significant policy victories to improve conditions for low income and marginalized residents in the District. The chart on the next page provides a chronology of major DC community organizing policy victories since 2002.

The list of victories is impressive on its own, but it is even more impressive when measured against the small budgets, relatively new leadership and overall limited capacity of DC organizing groups. When the work was done in coalition or partnership with other groups, the organizing groups not only engaged, trained and mobilized constituents to take action, but developed strategy and provided leadership to the overall efforts. It is important to note that the victories cited in the chart represent only a portion of the victories secured by DC organizing groups in the past 8 years. Depending on the circumstances, a fair amount of organizing is defensive and tries to prevent or modify negative policies or decisions. DC organizing groups have also been successful at defensive organizing, such as maintaining specific line items for critical social services amidst severe budget cuts. In addition to policy victories, there are several other community improvements or benefits that organizing groups have achieved. For instance, DC organizing groups have secured funds to renovate parks, playground and recreational centers; won unpaid wages for day laborers; won salary, benefits and pension increases for workers; secured greater protections for low and moderate income renters; created new opportunities for low and moderate income families to purchase homes.

Another way to illustrate the point that community organizing works in DC is to calculate the return on investment (ROI) of grant dollars to support organizing. We borrow a technique used by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy to determine the return on investment for foundations that support advocacy and organizing campaigns. The community

Therefore, the Return on Investment for DC regional funders in community organizing between 2004 and 2009 was \$122 for every grant dollar spent.

organizing ROI equals the monetized value of organizing policy victories divided by the total grants invested in the groups responsible for the victory over a specified period of time. We collected information from a sub-sample of four local organizing groups regarding the monetized value of policy victories²⁶ and amount of funding from foundations in the DC region²⁷ between 2004 and 2009. A conservative estimate for the monetized value of policy victories secured by these four organizing groups during that 5 year period was \$173,000,000²⁸ while the total grants from local foundations to the four organizing groups during the same period was \$1,413,515. Therefore, the Return on Investment for DC regional funders in community organizing between 2004 and 2009 was \$122 for every grant dollar spent. This is a very impressive rate of return. Part of this is attributable to the relatively low foundation investment in community organizing groups; however, we do not want the reader to applaud this low level of investment. Rather we want the reader to imagine the enhanced scale of dollars that could have been won to benefit low and moderate income families in DC if these groups had been funded at a much larger scale. ■

KEY VICTORIES

2002

Housing Act of 2002

Created a dedicated revenue source (15% of deed recordation fees and transfer taxes) which generated over \$200 million between 2002 and 2008.

2004

DC Language Access Act of 2004

Requires government agencies to account for limited-to-no English proficiency in the provision of public services.

2006

DC Inclusionary Zoning Law

Requires developers to sell a certain number of units at rates below the average median income with the goal to produce affordable housing, increase home ownership among low- and moderate income earners and create mixed income neighborhoods.

2006

Rent Control Reform Act & Tenant Right to Organize Act

Established the Office of the Tenant Advocate; affirmed that tenants have the right to organize and fines property owners for interfering; and limits rent increases.

2006

Living Wage (Way to Work) Act

Requires employers to pay at least \$12.50 (2010) per hour on contracts of \$100,000 or more over 12-months. The living wage rate is tied to inflation.

2006

Childcare Subsidy

Provided a \$21.5 million dollar increase in childcare subsidies and the consequent elimination of a 1,600 person waiting list for low-income childcare slots.

2006

Ballpark Omnibus Financing and Revenue Act

Created a \$450 million Community Benefits Fund to be resourced using Tax Increment Financing that would equal the public investment in the baseball stadium and support community development projects in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

2006

Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP)

ERAP helps DC residents address urgent housing needs (e.g., overdue rent, security deposit, first month's rent, etc.) with a focus on low-income families with children, senior citizens and people with disabilities.

2006

School Modernization Financing Act

Provides an estimated \$1 billion investment in school renovation and construction projects over 15 years.

2007

Enhanced Professional Security Amendment Act

Guarantees security officers a minimum wage of \$11.51 per hour and \$3.16 in benefits.

2008

Accrued Sick and Safe Leave Act of 2008

Requires that employers provide employees with 3-7 paid days off per year for both illness and safety as it relates to victims of sexual assault, stalking, or domestic violence depending on the size of the business and employees' full-time status and length of employment.²⁹

2009

Guidance Counselor Campaign

The DC council approved a budget line item supporting a counselor to student ratio of at least 1:250 at Wilson, Ballou and Anacostia Senior High Schools and \$1m in supports for counselors.

2009

Public Land Surplus Standards Amendment Act

Allows for greater Council oversight and public input regarding the sale of public property deemed "surplus" by the Mayor.

2010

Weatherization Training Program

Creates a \$3 million, city-financed pilot jobs training program to create a pipeline for residents in Ward 7 & 8 for living wage, union jobs in weatherizing homes in the District.

CONCLUSION

Washington, DC is a city of surprising contrasts. Washington, DC is a global symbol of democracy, yet its residents are subject to a limited version of democratic governance. DC has one of the most educated workforces in the country, yet it has one of the worst performing public school systems and the highest rate of adult literacy in the nation. DC is home to the first African American President of the United States, yet a large segment of the city's African American population faces persistent segregation of quality services along race, income and geographic lines. DC has one of the most educated workforces in the country, yet it has one of the worst performing public school systems and a rate of adult illiteracy that is comparable to major cities and higher than any state..

Resolving the persistent social, economic and political disparities faced by DC residents should be a matter of national pride. Residents in our nation's capital should not have to live under these conditions and community organizing is an effective strategy to bring about the changes that are needed. There are several factors that make now the opportune time for supporting community organizing in the District. First, DC's community organizing infrastructure is on the rise. This rise is marked by a significant growth in the number of community organizing groups, projects, intermediaries and coalitions in the city; a growing number of local funders who support community organizing groups and are partnering to strengthen local capacity. Second, DC's distinctive political structure creates unique opportunities for moving progressive policy change in the city. Organizers and advocates only have to contend with one level of government (e.g., Mayor and City Council) to pass

“state-level” legislation, as opposed to the other 50 states where state legislatures or assemblies might turn over progressive legislation passed on the local level. Additionally, DC's elected officials have a tendency to be more supportive of social safety net programs and government regulation. DC's role as the nation's capital and its proximity to national advocacy, policy, and research groups, as well as national media, holds the potential to project local policy campaigns to the national stage. Finally, community organizing in DC has been effective as evidenced by the impressive recent track record of policy victories that have leveraged hundreds of millions of dollars to improve the quality of life for low-income communities in the city.

Resolving the persistent social, economic and political disparities faced by DC residents should be a matter of national pride.

We hope that this paper has made the case for the need and opportunities to support community organizing in Washington, DC. The next paper in the series will highlight the local organizing groups in DC, provide a detailed analysis of the overall capacity of DC's community organizing infrastructure, and offer recommendations for how to enhance the strength of community organizing in the District. To explore whether supporting community organizing in DC is a good strategy for your specific foundation, it is important to dialogue with other funders and local community organizing groups. This is an essential and cost effective way to share information about evaluating organizing, integrating organizing

into an existing portfolio and working with trustees to explore the pros and cons of adopting an organizing approach. We encourage you to look to the Hill Snowden Foundation as a resource and partner in your exploration and hope that you will join us in our efforts to help Washington, DC become a true beacon of hope, equity, and justice for the nation and the world. ■



APPENDIX: ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILES

D.C. Jobs with Justice, the local affiliate of national Jobs with Justice network, DC Jobs with Justice seeks to protect worker rights and promote social justice through coordinating and mobilizing the energies of a broad-based, multi-ethnic coalition of over 30 labor, faith, community and student groups.

The **D.C. Language Access Coalition** works to ensure that DC residents with limited English proficiency and no-English proficiency have full access to basic public benefits and services as required by the 2004 DC Language Access Act.

EMPOWER DC seeks to improve the quality of life for low- and to moderate-income District residents by organizing around access to quality child care, affordable housing and education reform.

Jews United for Justice hosts educational forums and mobilizes cross-class and multi-racial support for advocacy campaigns aimed at winning meaningful change for all area residents.

The **Latino Economic Development Corporation's Affordable Housing Program** assists residents in rental housing to protect the long-term affordability and safety of their homes and prevent displacement.

Organizing Neighborhood Equity in D.C. protects low- to moderate-income residents' right to income, land and housing through building individual and communal leadership capacity, organizing tenants and negotiating community benefits agreements with developers and the city government.

Restaurant Opportunity Center — DC (ROC-DC), the local affiliate of the national Restaurant Opportunity Centers United network, is an emerging worker center supporting the leadership of restaurant workers toward raising industry standards and improving working conditions.

Success through Educational Progress (STEP-Up DC), a new partnership between a network of youth-serving organizations (DC Alliance of Youth Advocates) and an organization which blends documentary photography and advocacy (Critical Exposure), engages high school youth around improving high school graduation rates in the District.

The **Young Women's Project** has supported District teenagers, predominately young women, toward improving their lives and transforming their communities through campaigns focused on health and the foster care system.

Youth Education Alliance (YEA) is a youth-led organization focused on public education organizing. Their 9-point platform includes safe, sanitary and well-maintained school facilities; healthy and tasty school lunches; strong guidance counselor support and other items.

The **Washington Interfaith Network (WIN)**, the local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, uses tenant organizing, housing development and voter mobilization to advance an agenda around rebuilding long neglected District neighborhoods.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ GrantCraft (2008) *Funding Community Organizing: Social Change Through Civic Participation*. New York; Rubin, H.J. & Rubin, S.I. (1992). *Community Organizing and Development* (2nd ed.) New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- ² These tactics include, but are not limited to research, data analysis and publishing reports; strategic communications; educating the public and decision-makers; letter writing and testifying; civic engagement; legislative advocacy and direct action (e.g., protests, demonstrations, etc.).
- ³ Grantcraft, 2008
- ⁴ Rubin & Rubin, 1992
- ⁵ Additional resources on community organizing include the Alliance for Justice, which provides resources and direct legal advice to non-profit organizations, including foundations, engaged in or considering election-related activities (<http://www.afj.org/>); GrantCraft which polls grantmakers on various themes, e.g., evaluation, equity and social change, etc., and synthesizes their findings into guides, videos and workshops (<http://www.grantcraft.org/>) and the Neighborhood Funders Group offers the CO Toolbox to enhance funders understanding of community organizing (<http://www.nfg.org/>).
- ⁶ DC Fiscal Policy Institute (2010, March). *Poverty on the Rise in the District*. Washington, DC.
- ⁷ DC Fiscal Policy Institute (2010, February). *Nowhere To Go: As DC Housing Costs Rise, Residents Are Left With Fewer Affordable Housing Options*. Washington, DC.
- ⁸ Metropolitan Washington Council of Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, *Facts on Homelessness in Washington, DC: Overview*. Retrieved from <http://www.legalclinic.org/homelessness/factsheet.pdf>.
- ⁹ US Department of Education. *The Nation's Report Card – Mathematics 2009, Trial Urban District Assessment Results at Grades 4 & 8* (Retrieved July 23, 2010); US Department of Education. *The Nation's Report Card – Reading 2009 Trial Urban District Assessment Results at Grades 4 & 8*. (Retrieved July 23, 2010); US Department of Education, National Assessment of Educational Progress. State Comparisons. (Retrieved July 23, 2010)
- ¹⁰ District of Columbia Public Schools, Office of Data and Accountability (2010, July 13). *DCPS Secondary School Students Demonstrate Significant Gains for Third Consecutive Year: Test scores from all levels show significant improvement overall after three years of reform*. (Press Release)
- ¹¹ Mary Filardo, Marni Allen, et al. (2008, September). *Quality Schools, Healthy Neighborhoods and the Future of DC: Policy Report*. Washington, DC: DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education.
- ¹² DC College Access Program, DC Education Compact, DC Public Schools and State Education Office (2006, October). *Double the Numbers for College Success: A Call to Action for the District of Columbia*. Washington, DC.
- ¹³ U.S. Census Bureau (2010, June). *Public Education Finances: 2008*. Washington, DC.
- ¹⁴ Martha Ross and Brooke DeRenzis (2007). *Reducing Poverty in Washington and Rebuilding the Middle Class from Within*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute.
- ¹⁵ DC Learns (2007, August). *Adult Literacy Rates in Washington, DC*. Retrieved from http://www.dclearns.org/documents/factsheet_skills_1.4.pdf.
- ¹⁶ The Government of the District of Columbia, Department of Health (2010). *HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis, STD, TB Epidemiology – Annual Report 2009, Update*. Washington, DC.
- ¹⁷ Metropolitan Council of Governments and Washington Grantmakers (2009). *Community Health Status Indicator for Metropolitan Washington*. Washington, DC.
- ¹⁸ Rand Health (2008, January). *Assessing Health and Health Care in the District of Columbia: Working Paper*. Arlington, Virginia.
- ¹⁹ DC Hunger Solutions/Food Research and Action Center. *Facts on Hunger in DC*. (Retrieved July 23, 2010.).

²⁰ For additional information, please visit DC Vote's Online Library (<http://www.dcvote.org/>) and/or the DC Government Resource Center (<http://www.grc.dc.gov/grc/site/default.asp>).

²¹ Authors note that in July of 2010 the US House of Representatives' Financial Services and Government Appropriations subcommittee approved the District's 2011 budget with language granting autonomy in managing local funds. To become law, the bill needs the approval of members of the Senate Appropriations committee, full House and full Senate, who will consider the proposal in the fall of 2010. Advocates for statehood and voting rights are hopeful; Tim Craig (July 30, 2010). "House subcommittee approves bill promoting D.C. budget autonomy." Washington Post. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/29/AR2010072905894.html>)

²² Alice Rivlin (2009, July). "If the District of Columbia becomes a State: Fiscal Implications – Testimony to the Council of the District of Columbia." Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

²³ Government Accounting Office (2003, May). *District of Columbia Structural Deficit and Management Imbalance Issues*. Washington, DC.

²⁴ In some ways, two federal subcommittees serve as the other layer of governmental authority, i.e., the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs' Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia and the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform's Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, Postal Service and the District of Columbia, but Congress has only disapproved three of the more than 2,000 legislative acts that have been passed by the DC City Council since 1974.

²⁵ Lisa Ranghelli and Julia Craig (2010, March). *Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities: Impacts of Advocacy, Organizing and Civic Engagement in Los Angeles County*. Washington, DC: National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy.

²⁶ Although this information was self-reported, we verified amounts using multiple sources.

²⁷ We limited our analysis to funders in the DC region because that is the focus of this paper. Additionally, three of the four groups in this analysis did not receive funds from funders outside of the region and only one group received minimal support from a funder outside the region.

²⁸ The monetized policy victories included in the ROI are as follows: **\$21.5 million** – *Childcare budget subsidy*; **\$7.5 million** – *Emergency Rental Assistance Program*; **\$2 million** – *Hotel Omnibus Financing & Development Act*; **\$18 million** – Secured city financing for purchase and renovation of 2 limited equity coops; **\$15 million** – "Living Wage" Act. The wage increase was tied to inflation and increased from \$11.75 to \$12.50 from 2006-2008. However, we only counted the estimated increase in earned income for the 1st year because we could not get reliable estimates for the subsequent years; **\$9 million** – *Enhanced Professional Security Amendment Act*. We only counted the first year of this increase because we could not get reliable estimates for subsequent years; **\$100 million** – *Housing Production Trust Fund*. Each year since 2004, advocates and organizers have pushed for full funding of the Trust Fund totaling \$200 million since 2004. To be conservative, we only counted half of the total amount in the ROI because organizers were only a part of the overall coalition effort. Additionally, we did not count the estimated hundreds of millions in additional development investment that was leveraged by the Fund.

²⁹ Please refer to the DC Employment Justice Center for an update on progress toward implementing this bill: http://www.dcejc.org/?template=program_advocacy.html.

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ABOUT

The **Hill-Snowdon Foundation** (HSF) was founded by Arthur B. Hill in 1959 and was managed by family members on a volunteer basis for 40 years as a typical “kitchen table” family foundation. By 1997, the Foundation's assets had grown significantly, and the Board decided that they should be more strategic in their grantmaking. HSF partnered with the Tides Foundation beginning in 1998 and through this relationship developed a new focus to its grantmaking and began developing more systematic policies and procedures. The new focus for its grantmaking was grounded in a philosophy of justice and fairness for some of the most vulnerable members of this society, low-income families - particularly low-income,

youth of color and low-wage workers. Specifically, HSF chose to focus on Youth Organizing, Economic Justice Organizing and strengthening community organizing capacity in DC. Moreover, the Foundation's new focus was also grounded in the idea of a re-invigorated democracy, particularly for those people who have been marginalized or whose voices had been held silent in the decision making process to determine policies and practices that directly affect them. Thus, the Foundation adopted a core strategy of supporting community organizing in order to develop the leadership, skills and collective power of marginalized and disenfranchised communities to influence the decisions that impact their lives.



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